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Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books: A New Perspective

Defining the Concept

My paper deals with an analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* from a schema theory perspective. This approach provides me with the perfect tool for analysing these ambiguous and controversial texts. The concept of schema theory can be best defined as "a body of ideas which has passed from psychology, through Artificial Intelligence (AI) and into discourse analysis" (Cook 1994: 9). In the first part of my article I will define schema theory giving a brief description of its origins, general principles, terminology and main concepts.

Although the notion of schema theory as a mental representation can be traced back to Kant's *Criteria of Pure Reason* (1787) (the German word is also schema) the origin of modern schema theory can be found in the Gestalt psychology of the 1920s and 1930s (Cook 1994: 9). Its basic argument is that a new experience is understood by comparison with a stereotypical version of a similar experience kept in memory (Cook 1994: 9). The new experience is then defined in terms of its deviation from stereotypical version or conformity to it. The theory can be applied not only to the processing of sensory data, but also to the processing of any written text (Cook 1994: 9).

Both Semino (1995) and Cook (1994) noticed an increased interest in the application of schema theory to the analysis of literary readings. This has resulted from the awareness of the connection between "background knowledge and interpretation variability" (Semino 1995: 84). According to Muske quoted in Semino, the attractiveness of schema theory to literary scholars resides mainly in the fact that it offers a flexible framework "within which to investigate the interplay between reader's knowledge of the world and texts in literary comprehension" (1995: 84).

Cook (1994: 15) distinguishes three main types of schemata: world, text, and language schemata. By world schema one must understand schematic representation of the world e.g. conference schema; by text schema, schematic representation of certain text types. For example, diary writing obeys certain text

patterns. Language schema represents schematic representation of the language we use for certain given situations (e.g. the language we use when we are at a cocktail party is different from the one employed at a conference). Deviation at the level of text and language disrupts the reader's schema, causing according to Cook (1994) schema disruption or breaking which consequently results in schema change or schema refreshment. Cook (1994) also introduced the concept of schema adding when we deal with a reinforcement of the existing schema.

The second part of my paper proposes an analysis of *Alice* books only from the perspective of text schema. Textual schemata are perhaps more reader-variable than world schemata or language schemata. They depend very much upon experience of other texts, and this is more likely to vary between individuals than experience of the language and of the world. A given text, for instance, may appear highly original to a particular individual, but very unoriginal to another, if the former has experience of other texts, with the same structure, while the latter has no such experience (Cook 1994).

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are no exceptions to these rules. Furthermore, the reader-variability or text schemata have given rise to many interpretations, some of them more "original" than the text itself, others purely speculative or, on the contrary, very relevant. In fact, *Alice* books are notorious as being the battle-grounds of interpretative disagreement. They have been analysed many times over according to the tenets of different critical approaches. This large number of interpretations is also due to the fact that *Alice* books are meant both for children and for adults alike.

Fairy-tale Schema

Alice in Wonderland and *Through the Looking-Glass* were initially written for children and the first text schema activated at a superficial reading of the two books, is that of a fairy tale. First of all, Wonderland and the Looking Glass country stand for "the other world" often met in fairy tales as an alternative reality to the actual one. The heroine, Alice has to pass through an intermediary space placed between reality and non-reality in order to enter the other world: the rabbit hole, the glass, doors, etc. Sometimes the entrance into the other reality is marked by interdiction: i.e. the doors to the Wonderland are all locked. Secondly, the creatures that inhabit this alternative magic world are animals or flowers that can talk, mythical animals, the Gryphon, the Unicorn. To all these we may add queens, knights in armour and kings.

In almost all fairy tales metamorphosis is a common theme. Alice changes her size and shape very often and this change in form is rendered possible by eating or drinking magic potions. The initiatic journey full of obstacles that the hero and heroine has to go on in order to achieve a final goal is also present, especially in *Through The Looking-Glass* when Alice has to overcome some obstacles in order to become queen. Some critics have interpreted this initiatic journey as a necessary step towards reaching maturity. But even though, the fairy-tale schema has some elements to sustain it: the other reality, metamorphosis, initiatic trip, it is immediately challenged and refreshed. This is the reason why many children, especially those who have read a translated version of *Alice* books, are disappointed by the story. They expect the pattern of a fairy tale and while reading *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, they confront the stories with the background knowledge of fairy tales. Their expectations are, of course, not fulfilled. The fairy tale schema is just the superficial level of the two stories. The elements that disrupt the schema can be easily found. A main difference between the classic fairy tales and *Alice* books is the latter's main concern with language. "All that happens, happens in language and through language"[1] (Deleuze 1969: 34, my translation). The other world is not the realm of princesses, witches, fairies but the abstract world of language; it is almost a non-referential world. The two books can be considered "the prison house of language," a syntagm used for experimental literature.

Furthermore, the characters inhabiting the magic realm of fairy tales are, of course, endowed with supernatural powers, but still their behaviour and language resemble very much that of normal people, whereas the other world proposed by Lewis Carroll governs itself after different rules. The creatures of Wonderland refuse any connection with reality. It is almost impossible to imagine the Mad Hatter or the March Hare inhabiting the magic realm of fairy tales, they would be too "mad" for them. Their unique preoccupation seems to be no sorcery or the preparation of magic potions but the abstract function of language. The initiatic trip, mentioned above becomes a mock one. Carroll clearly scorns any moralising pretence that his story might have, since Alice does not learn anything from the trip she takes or from the mad characters she encounters. In his preface to *Sylvie and Bruno* quoted in Jackson (2002: 35), Lewis Carroll identifies three different types of mental states, which are related to the three modes: mimetic, fantastic and marvellous. The first condition Carroll terms "ordinary," the second is "eerie" and the third is "trance-like."

[1] Tout ce qui se passe, se passe dans le language et se passe par le language.

In a normal state of mind, humans see a real world; in an eerie state they see a transitional world. These three categories correspond to mimetic, fantastic and marvellous literary forms. Fairy tales occupy the boundary between the real and the imaginary shifting the relations between them through their indeterminacy. *Alice* books go beyond the "eerie" state; almost reaching the so-called "trance-like" state that rejects any connection with reality.

Metamorphosis, as I have already mentioned, plays an important part in fairy tales. People transformed into animals, princes into frogs, magical shifts of shape, size or colour, have constituted one of the main pleasures of the fairy tale mode. Nevertheless, even that important element – metamorphosis, which usually activates fairy tale schemata, is here distorted. In allegories or fairy-tales metamorphosis always plays a teleological function; there is always a reason behind any transformation (Jackson 2002: 81). In most cases it serves as a metaphor and it is almost always redemptive.

Lewis Carroll is considered one of the first writers of fantastic stories to change this perspective on metamorphosis. Beginning with Alice's repeated shifts of size, metamorphosis has started to become meaningless and progressively, independent of the will or desire of the subject (Jackson 2002: 81). Physical transformation like in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* simply happens and it is no longer redemptive or metaphorical.

Another important aspect that comes to deconstruct a fairy tale schema is the problem of identity. The characters of fairy tales often change their physical appearance but, although transformed into animals, plants, they never lose their identity or even question it. The transformation Alice suffers does not alter her self – she remains the same sensible, good-mannered little girl to the end, but still the problem of identity troubles her.

> But if I'm not the same, the next question is: who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle. (Carroll 1993: 14)

> What do you mean by that? Said the Caterpillar sternly explain yourself!
> I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir, said Alice, because I'm not myself, you see. (Carroll 1993: 31).

This inclination towards the self becomes one of the reasons why *Alice* books have been considered to make a transition between the fantastic and marvellous mode typical for the modern fiction e.g. Borges, Kafka.

Nonsense Literature Schema

Even though at the beginning of *Alice* books the elements I have described so far suggest a fairy tale schema, this perspective changes radically as we come to know better the world of Alice adventures, a world governed by ambiguity or even more, marked by nonsense. The fantastic pushes towards an area of non-signification, thus the nonsense schema is activated and sustained by the absurd of the situations described in *Alice* books and especially by the playful use of language.

> "Mine is a long *tale*!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice and sighing.
> "It's a long *tail*, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail; "but why do you call it sad?" (Carroll 1993: 21)

The characters themselves seem to be aware of the nonsensical world they are living in; they constantly repeat the word "nonsense" or "lack of meaning": "What *nonsense* we are talking!" (Carroll 1993: 74), "What do you suppose is the use of a child *without meaning*?" (Carroll 1993: 161, my emphasis). Lewis Carroll's primary concern seems to be language. He draws attention to problems of signification, presenting a confused, chaotic world which gives up the pretence to represent absolute meaning or reality. According to Jackson (2002: 141), when Alice walks through the mirror and falls down the rabbit hole, she enters the space of non-signification in which her acquired language system ceases to be of any help. Words have no control over things or objects: a baby becomes a pig, a grin becomes a cat and words begin to have a life of their own. No word has a meaning inseparably attached to it. For Carroll as for Wittgenstein, language is the means of constructing meaning – outside the language world, there lies only nonsense (Jackson 2002: 142).

The nonsense schema is activated by that strange semiotic excess where signs are deprived of significance. As I have already observed, in Lewis Carroll's case words have started to lose their seemingly inseparable sense. Thus, Alice is faced with a non-referential world, a strange realm in which proper names have to mean something, while the common names seem to have no fixed meaning attached to them. In Wonderland "there are no ends, only signs which lead nowhere, landscapes which are labyrinths without a centre" (Jackson 2002: 142).

> She found herself in a long, low hall [. . .] There were doors, all around the hall, but they were all locked. (Carroll 1993: 10)

> She was wandering up and down, and trying turn after turn but always coming back. (Carroll 1993: 98)

It is very important to make a distinction between nonsense and the absurd literature. Jackson (2002: 144) paraphrasing Sewell and Prickett claims that:

> nonsense engages the force towards disorder in continual play. It tends to re-combine different semantic units which remain distinct from one another. It fractures rather than dissolves, returning to rigidity and the separation of individual units. Far from being "free" or formless, it [nonsense] is the most highly organised and the most rigidly controlled of all forms of fantasy. It is a fantasy of extreme logic, of rationality pushed to its limits.

The impression of a meaningless world deprived of any logic is, in fact, a result of the overuse of logic which is constantly abused and pushed to its extremes. But in the literature of the absurd the world as we know it is no longer controlled; logic or other form of rationality has no power over it.

The Theatre of the Absurd Schema

In the hierarchical order the absurd follows nonsense. In fact, it is considered that the genre of the absurd stems from nonsense literature. In other words, we cannot say that the activation of absurd literature schema implies the breaking of the nonsense schema; on the contrary, the construction of the former is a result of a continuous adding of the latter, thus we are dealing with schema adding. This is the reason why so many critics consider Lewis Carroll the forerunner of the theatre of the absurd. The schema specific to the theatre of the absurd is activated by the technique generally known as the dissolution of discourse usually caused by the breaking up of any predictable or reliable relation between the signifier and the signified or between the message intended and what the receiver of the message understands. The dissolution of discourse translates itself into lack of meaning and lack of communication.

In Beckett's or Ionesco's plays the characters are engaged in long conversations, all signifying nothing, leading nowhere. In *Alice* books conversation is almost as barren as in the theatre of the absurd. Furthermore, each character is obsessed with only one topic of conversation. The Mad Hatter is obsessed with time and tea, the Queen of Hearts with cutting off heads, the Duchess with finding morals in everything. Their strange stubbornness in choosing the same topic of conversation makes Alice exclaim: "How can you talk to a person if he always says the same thing?" (Carroll 1993: 49). In this way, they

become hermetically isolated in a self-centred discourse. But their obsession with certain subjects of conversation is not the only one responsible for their failure in communicating. To this we may add the misinterpretation of idioms, of homophones, of homographs, etc.

The lack of communication and the dissolution of discourse are also due to the characters' original use of language to signify whatever they would like to. Humpty Dumpty claims the greatest freedom to give any meaning to any word (Sutherland 1970: 149). With Humpty Dumpty's stipulative definitions of words chaos begins and communication cannot be established any longer. The discourse becomes one without an object – empty talking.

The Surrealist Literature Schema

The dream theme presented in *Alice* books influences and alters the discourse. As a consequence, we activate the surrealist schema sustained by numerous elements, also found in the surrealist writings. The specific atmosphere of dreams surpasses the chaotic world of the literature of the absurd; reality is turned upside down and another one is constructed. Surrealist schema springs out from the theatre of the absurd to which we add a few more elements. Therefore, we are dealing again with schema adding.

The first surrealist elements or themes which activate this schema are: the disintegration of objects, as in the Sheep's shop, and the fluidity of forms as in "the glass was beginning to melt away, just like bright silvery mist" (Carroll 1993: 87). Other similarities between *Alice* books and the surrealistic writings are best understood in terms of narrative structure and of the relation between text and reader. Both are much closer to a marvellous mode, as described by Lewis Carroll himself, in which the narrator or the characters are rarely in a position of uncertainty. Even Alice eventually gets used to that anarchic world: "this seemed quite natural to me" (Carroll 1993: 23).

As I have already mentioned, surrealism is closer to the marvellous – it is super-real and its etymology implies that it is presenting a world above this one rather than fracturing it from inside (Jackson 2002: 36). Lewis Carroll proposes another reality not related to the actual one. *Alice* books become non-referential texts not only through the language used, but also through the situation described.

The discourse of the marvellous, the characteristic discourse of oneiric literature, is best described by Novalis as "narrative without coherence but rather with associations like dreams [. . .] full of words, but without any meaning and

coherence [. . .] like fragments" (qtd. in Jackson 2002: 145). The theme of free associations based on Freud's theories of the subconscious can also be traced in *Alice* books, especially in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Free associations are best described as chain reactions induced by oneiric, fabulous discourse, or as fluid passing from one scene to another.

Chapter 5, "Wool and Water" in *Through the Looking-Glass* is the best example of oneiric discourse based on free associations. The White Queen with whom Alice is having a conversation turns slowly into a sheep and the landscape changes gradually into a shop and then the shop into a river. In this passage we are not dealing with metamorphoses like in fairy tales but rather with that oneiric sensation that the objects around have lost all consistency and can take any form. Another illustrative example is offered by Chapter 3, "Looking-Glass Insects," where Alice suddenly finds herself on a train talking to the Guard, and in the next moment under a tree.

> In another moment she felt the carriage rise straight up into the air, and in her fright she caught at the thing nearest to her hand, which happened to be the Goat's beard. But the beard seemed to melt away as she touched it, and she found herself sitting quietly under a tree. (Carroll 1993: 106)

Absurd conversation pertaining to the theatre of the absurd is also characteristic for surrealistic writing, but here its absurdity is pushed to its limits. The extreme rationality characteristic to nonsense is now completely lost.

> "Tickets, please!" said the Guard, putting his head in at the window. In a moment everybody was holding out a ticket [. . .]
> "Now then show your ticket, child!" the Guard went on, looking angrily at Alice. And a great many voices all sat together ("like the chorus of a song," thought Alice). "Don't keep him waiting, child! Why, his time is worth a thousand pounds a minute!"
> "I'm afraid I haven't got one", Alice said in a frightened tone: "there wasn't a ticket-office where I came from." And again the chorus of voices went on. "There wasn't room for one where she came from. The land there is worth a thousand pounds an inch." (Carroll 1993: 104)

Moving without advancing, the impression of immobility while trying to walk, running fast but arriving nowhere, the continuous fluid change of objects and of the landscape which devours itself creating new forms, all are elements prompting a surrealistic story schema. The last two pages of Chapter 9, "Queen Alice" offer a perfect example of a surrealistic piece of writing. The characters

change into monsters behaving in a grotesque manner, the objects dissolve and take other forms, strange associations produce fabulous forms and inanimate objects begin to have a life of their own.

> As to the bottles, they each took a pair of plates, which they hastily fitted on as wings, and so, with forks for legs, went fluttering about in all directions. [. . .]
> And all the guests began drinking it directly, and very queerly they managed it: some of them put their glasses upon their heads like extinguishers, and drank all that trickled down their faces [. . .] (Carroll 1993: 170)

The discourse is anarchic, deviant, and meaningless. It combines units in new relations and presents discrete elements which are juxtaposed and then re-assembled in unexpected, apparently impossible combinations. Sometimes the discourse becomes tautological. The words themselves are not ambiguous; it is the intricate syntax which renders the statement impossible to understand.

> "I quite agree with you," said the Duchess; "and the moral of that is – Be what you would seem to be – Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that want you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise."
> "I think I should understand that better," Alice said very politely, "if I had it written down: but I can't quite follow it as you say it." (Carroll 1993: 60)

If nonsense literature is characterised by an extreme logic which gives a false impression of disorder, the literature or the absurd begins to lose it, while the surrealism is completely deprived of any logic and rationality. I have emphasised once again the differences between the three levels of discourse to demonstrate that we arrive at a surrealistic story schema through a continuous adding in schemata.

The Metafiction Schema

The four schemata prompted by a slight change in discourse are all interrelated, they are all constructed starting from an alternative reality different from the actual one. The next schema is by far the most original, having also a defamiliarising effect on the reader. One would not expect to find in a book initially written for children so many metafictional elements. *Alice* books, especially *Through the Looking-Glass*, can also be considered books about language, about writing fiction. Michael Charles (qtd. in Cristofovici 1991: 67) defines metafiction as the deliberate interaction between discourse and metadiscourse.

One of the main principles of metafiction, which also prompts the metafiction schemata is the infinite regression. Wittgenstein (qtd. in Cristofovici 1991: 68) defined language as "a type of infinite regression of words spoken by other words." A passage taken from *Through the Looking-Glass* illustrates Carroll's awareness of the way in which language can be used to talk about language. The White Knight wishes to sing for Alice a song whose tune is his own invention.

> The name of the song is called *"Haddocks' Eyes"*.
> Oh, that's the name of the song, is it? Alice said, trying to feel interested.
> No, you don't understand, the Knight said, looking a little vexed. That's what the name is *called*. The name really is *"The Aged Aged Man"*.
> Then I ought to have said "that's what the song is called." Alice corrected herself.
> No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The *song* is called *"Ways and Means"* but that's only what it's *called*, you know!
> Well, what is the *song*, then? [. . .]
> I was coming to that, the Knight said. The song really is *"A-sitting On A Gate."*
>
> (Carroll 1993: 155, original emphasis)

Carroll shows here that verbal symbols may be used to refer to other verbal symbols. This is the infinite regression I have referred to so far. Alice is confused because she does not realise what the Knight is doing when he states one linguistic expression to be the call-name of another (Sutherland 1970: 119). Carroll makes a distinction between the thing, the name of the thing and the name of the name of the thing. Nagel (qtd. in Sutherland 1970: 119) discusses this passage in his treatment of call names and he considers Alice's difficulty to be "the type of misunderstanding that may arise from the failure to distinguish between fragments of discourse (such as names) and what linguistic expressions are about to designate."

Furthermore, we can equate the written text of *Through the Looking-Glass* with the mirror through which Alice passes into the other world (Cristofovici 1991: 65). Considering this equivalence between text and mirror we can claim that the commentary about the text is inserted in the text itself. What is most interesting is that the White King – the character who makes the comment about the metalinguistic characteristics of discourse – is the author himself as Tenniel portrayed him in the original edition of the *Alice* books. The author inserts himself in the text in an almost postmodernist manner, and becomes a character who helps Alice finish her journey. He obviously mocks the distant, neutral, all knowing, omniscient narrator who appears in fairy tales.

The authorial voice which does not know more than his characters, simulating a position similar to that of the reader, makes itself heard again in the dialogue between Alice and Humpty Dumpty: "Alice didn't venture to ask what he paid them with; and so you see I can't tell you!" (Carroll 1993: 132).

The infinite regression is similarly present in Alice's dream and the King's dream functioning again as a signal within the text, thus commenting upon its fictional quality. Carroll multiplies the theme of the dream within the dream, which reminds us of Borges's characters conscious of the fictional quality of the world they inhabit and of the fact that they are fictional products. The unreality of the characters, their fictional nature is made obvious in Chapter 4, "Tweedledum and Tweedledee" when the twins claim that Alice is just a fictional character.

> "He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about?"
> Alice said: "Nobody can guess that."
> "Why, about *you*!" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. "And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"
> "Where I am now, of course," said Alice.
> "Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!" (Carroll 1993: 117)

What is most innovative is that Lewis Carroll creates a character that has a double status. First, Alice is a fictional character taking part in the adventures described. Secondly, she is a character who belongs to a discursive universe which she continuously tries to understand and decipher, a status resembling that of the reader. Thus, the text becomes a huge puzzle which needs to be rearranged and whose meaning has to be interpreted. This explains the satisfaction the reader experiences when deciphering a pun or a misused homonym. Not surprisingly, the structure of *Through the Looking-Glass* follows that of a game of chess. Martin Gardner (qtd. in Cristofovici 1991: 65) demonstrates that the text is, in fact, an extended game of chess and each movement Alice makes on the chessboard is according to the rules of the game.

Furthermore, Lewis Carroll parodies the referential level of interpreting literally phrases and idioms, by inventing words, deprived of referentiality. The well-known poem "Jabberwocky" also feigns the construction of a text which gives only the illusion of meaning. The dialogue with Humpty-Dumpty parodies its interpretation.

The structure of the two books is concentric: the book within a book (the looking glass book Alice finds in the other room), the dream within a dream,

the story within a story. The story, as it is, is framed by two poems, so we have two types of discourse: the narrative discourse and the poetical one. In fact, all the poems inserted in the story are meant to explain and mirror the narrated happenings; they, in a way, announce what will happen next. This is the case of the famous limericks about Humpty Dumpty and Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Furthermore, the two books contain famous pieces of writing by Wordsworth and Hood, magnificently parodied by Carroll. "Resolution and Independence" was burlesqued in the "Aged Aged Man," and the schoolmaster-murderer's kind attitude towards his pupils in "Dream of Eugene Aram" was mocked in the "Walrus and Carpenter."

In this paper, I have tried to approach *Alice* books from the perspective of text schemata. This analysis enabled me to understand how Carroll's writings were able to give rise to so many interpretations. It was very interesting to see how many different types of discourse could be found in a book which, initially was meant for children and how much of the ambiguity present in the text is caused by the skilful interplay between the various schemata described above.

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